

Fentanyl: A Hidden Danger

MCC Patient Education Module

Using illegal drugs comes with risks, and these risks are compounded when drugs are laced with other substances. It's common knowledge among users that certain drugs, such as heroin, are cut with other substances. However, users may not be aware that other street drugs can be laced with chemicals to increase the potency or change the effect of the high.

For example, the U.S. and Canadian authorities issued a warning in March 2015 against fentanyl-laced heroin. Fentanyl-laced heroin is thought to be responsible for an ever-increasing number of overdose deaths in multiple states.

Other street drugs such as marijuana, heroin and cocaine may also be laced with chemicals. These last drugs produce extremely powerful and sometimes dangerous, even fatal, results. It's important to understand the potential dangers of using such drugs and how to avoid them at all costs.

Nearly all street drugs can be laced with something. The drugs laced and the substances used to lace the drugs vary according to the market and demand. This makes the job harder for first responders when there's an overdose.

A new trend has emerged in which an anesthetic drug called fentanyl is added to heroin. Fentanyl is a laboratory-made synthetic opioid. Opioids are drugs that act like opium by numbing pain and making people sleepy. Many opioid painkillers are prescribed for those recovering from surgery or an accident. They can also be prescribed for people suffering from chronic pain, such as cancer.

However, lacing heroin with fentanyl is extremely dangerous. Like most opioids, fentanyl suppresses activity in the central nervous system, as does heroin. Combining the two can push a user's body over the edge into a coma, respiratory distress and death.

Many users don't know that they're buying fentanyl-laced heroin until it's too late. Others find that instead of purchasing heroin on the street, they bought a bag of fentanyl instead. Because it is synthetically derived, it's cheaper to mix a lot of fentanyl with heroin or even sell it by itself instead of selling authentic heroin.

This leads to fatalities because users inject their typical amount of heroin, and aren't prepared for the significantly stronger fentanyl entering the bloodstream. By the time they realize they're in trouble, it may be too late to call for help, or they may be unable to ask for help.

Fentanyl-laced heroin goes by the street names Magic City, Bud Ice, Theraflu, Diesel, Income Tax and Coors Light. These are the known street names — there are likely to be many others.

Like heroin, cocaine is often laced with fentanyl with similar results. When combined with cocaine, fentanyl suppresses the central nervous and respiratory systems and can lead to heart attack or respiratory distress and death.

Drug Cartels and drug dealers purposely lace drugs like heroin and cocaine with fentanyl to make them more addictive.

The death toll from the opioid epidemic is growing worse. The rise in drug-related deaths is related to more people using heroin, and heroin laced with fentanyl.